Exemplar of Socialist Realism: Appreciation Drew on Folk Sources Color and Rhythms
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An Appreciation

Aram Khachaturian was an important Soviet composer, a highly popular one in the Soviet Union and abroad, a thorough professional—and yet his music appears to have scant chance of survival. Already most of his compositions have disappeared from the Western repertory.

A man of pronounced gifts, he was caught in the Soviet bureaucratic bind. During Stalin's day, all Soviet creative endeavor was supposed to reflect the ideals of the state. That meant "optimistic" art, Socialist Realism, culture that "the masses" could easily assimilate.

In music, Soviet composers who dared to use techniques of "decadent" Western composers—all composers who employed dissonance were branded as decadents—were called "formalists." The most dreaded charge was to be accused of formalism.

Drew on Folk Sources

That is exactly what happened to Khachaturian in 1948. He, along with the most important Soviet composers—Serge Prokofiev, Dmitri Shostakovich, Dmitri Kabalevsky and Vissarion Shebalin, among others—were attacked by Soviet ideologists and forced to recant. After that, Khachaturian took no chances. He composed safe music, drawing on folk sources for his most popular works.

For a time he was one of the most-played Soviet composers in the West. Serge Koussevitzky, the conductor of the Boston Symphony, was interested in the then younger group of Soviet composers, and Khachaturian figured prominently on his programs. Other conductors here and abroad found much to admire; many pianists took the Khachaturian concerto into their repertory; violinists were constantly playing the violin concerto.

Color and Rhythms

There was a good deal to admire on first hearing Khachaturian's music. His folk tunes sounded exotic, he scored with a good deal of color, and the snappy rhythms lent a great deal of impetus to his works. He frankly composed popular music, and there was a period when the "Saber Dance" from the "Gayne" ballet was omnipresent.

But, as listeners became exposed to his music, it was evident that much of it was formula writing. The actual content was thin. It never took more than two or three hearings to get the meat out of any piece—and after that there was nothing left. In effect, he was a bureaucratic composer, turning out well-crafted pieces of no particular personality, and certainly nothing that would rock the boat.

Some Soviet composers, such as Shostakovich, broke free of the ideologists toward the end of their careers, writing music that went against many of the Soviet "rules." Khachaturian never did. He seemed content to go along as an examplar of Socialist Realism, and he never lived up to his real gifts.